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SUBJECT: POLLING FOR EFFECT: EYE INTO TAIWAN POLITICS AND CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

REF: A. 2004 TAIPEI 0345

B. 2004 TAIPEI 3771

C. TAIPEI 2076

¶1. Summary. Lien Chan visited Mainland China April 26-May 2, and James Soong is currently visiting, both with near unanimous endorsement from "Blue" (KMT and PFP) voters and considerable support from neutral, and even a slice of "Green" (DPP), voters. Support for Lien's trip actually increased over the course of his visit, reflecting widespread support in Taiwan for engagement with Mainland China to reduce cross-Strait tensions, even as Taiwan voters remain peeved by Beijing's Anti-Secession Law and threat to use &non-peaceful means.<sup>8</sup>

¶2. Taiwan's vibrant public opinion polling industry, which closely tracks cross-Strait and virtually every other public issue, is largely media-driven, with most surveys rush jobs to create headlines or to persuade readers. Some, however, are more comprehensive, fully cross-tabulated with ethnic and party identity, and trace major political trends in Taiwan. Among the trends identified in multi-year surveys have been the long-term rise of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP); emerging Taiwan identity, but without an accompanying rise in pro-independence sentiment; long-term support for maintaining the cross-Strait status quo; and growing support for resolving cross-Strait tensions. End Summary.

¶3. When Kuomintang (KMT) Chairman Lien Chan told Beijing University students on April 29 that he represented the views of &most people<sup>8</sup> in Taiwan, Vice President Annette Lu countered that &most Taiwanese<sup>8</sup> viewed Lien as selling out Taiwan to China. Both claims drew on particular public opinion polls the two leaders had selected from the pro-Blue and pro-Green press. Opinion polls play an important role in Taiwan politics, and politicians use them as often to create as to understand public opinion. When he was asked about President Chen's views on Lien's trip, Deputy Presidential SecGen Ma Yung-cheng started his explanation with "according to polls and other indications...."<sup>8</sup> Taiwan's plethora of public opinion polls range from the balanced and methodologically sound to the politically motivated intended to convince. To the latter end, political parties have their own in-house opinion polling operations, which churn out dual sets of polls, one for internal use to guide party leaders and one for publication to persuade and create political momentum.

Lien Chan: "Journey of Peace" or "Taiwan Sell-Out"

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¶4. In recent weeks, public opinion polling in Taiwan has focused on the fast moving state of cross-Strait relations and, particularly, KMT Chairman Lien Chan's April 26-May 2 trip, and People First Party (PFP) Chairman James Soong's May 5-14 trip, to Mainland China. The &Blue<sup>8</sup> (pro-unification) &United Daily News<sup>8</sup> published a poll on May 2 showing 56 percent of respondents island-wide believed the Lien-Hu talks improved cross-Strait peace and 51 percent believed Lien did "an excellent job<sup>8</sup> on his trip. A survey in the centrist &China Times<sup>8</sup> the same day showed 56 percent of respondents were pleased with Lien's trip and 54 percent believed he did not betray Taiwan's interests to China. On the other hand, a poll by the "Green" (pro-independence) Taiwan ThinkTank published in the &Liberty Times<sup>8</sup> April 26 proclaimed in headlines that 71% of respondents opposed Lien Chan making any agreement with Chinese leaders.

¶5. None of these published polls, however, explained methodology used or released cross-tabulations that would have enabled evaluation of the reports. Rather, readers were left to accept or reject the poll results wholly on faith or political allegiance. The Taiwan ThinkTank poll (para 4) reported that 67% of respondents opposed Taiwan "accepting one China and becoming a local government ruled by Communist China,<sup>8</sup> suggesting questions in that poll were leading and politicized.

¶6. The Lien trip itself appears to have raised the public assessment of Lien and the KMT. The centrist (some say "light Blue") TVBS Poll Center conducted a poll on May 2, immediately after Lien Chan returned to Taipei. Respondents

&satisfied8 with Lien,s trip and viewing it as "successful" (46% and 53%) outnumbered those who were "dissatisfied" and thought it &unsuccessful8 (25% and 21%). As one of the few polling agencies in Taiwan to also publish cross-tabulations (party affiliation, residence, age), the TVBS survey revealed that, as might be expected, overwhelming majorities of KMT and PFP Pan-Blue supporters were in the "satisfied" and "successful" columns. The survey, however, also showed that a surprisingly high 34% of ruling-DPP supporters judged the Lien trip "successful." The poll further showed a relatively high level of approval in heavily "Green" south Taiwan, where approximately half of respondents termed the Lien trip "successful." Similarly, an island-wide poll by the centrist ERA (Niandai) Survey Research Center found that respondents who believed the Lien visit was "helpful" to cross-Strait peace had increased from 46% before to 55% after the visit (though the absence of cross-tabulations conceals the political identity of this shift).

17. Recent DPP polls show a corresponding decline in the DPP approval rating from 37% in mid-April to 24% in early May, just after Lien,s return from Mainland China. Coming just before the May 14 National Assembly vote, this finding has stimulated considerable angst within the DPP, including fingerpointing at the President and his conciliatory statements about the KMT and PFP Mainland China trips (Ref C).

#### Lien Chan,s Trip and the KMT Chairmanship

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18. Lien,s highly publicized and -- in the view of most KMT supporters -- &successful8 trip, however, encouraged speculation that Lien might try to stay on as Chairman. Lien Chan's announcement earlier this year that he would step down as KMT Chairman in August stimulated a heated campaign between Taipei Mayor Ma Ying-jeou and LY Speaker Wang Jin-pyng to succeed him and position themselves for the 2008 presidential race. PFP LY Caucus Convenor Chen Chi-pin told AIT that he and other Pan-Blue LY members expect Lien to reverse his decision to step down. Public opinion polls, however, do not show positive popular response to Lien's trip converting into support for Lien remaining as Chairman. Rather, the May 2 TVBS survey showed KMT voters opposed to Lien staying on increased from 43% in February to 48% after the trip, compared to a smaller increase in those favoring him staying on (36% to 39%). The poll found, moreover, that KMT supporters continue to give top preference to Ma (57%) as the next party Chairman, with Lien trailing at 22% and Wang at 13%.

#### Polling Deficiencies

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19. Opinion survey organizations with which AIT spoke typically conduct quick (3-6 hour) evening telephone random surveys of approximately 1,000 people based on population distribution. Most public opinion polls, however, report only composite, island-wide figures and omit the cross-tabulations essential to analyzing survey results. ERA, the most prolific polling agency in Taiwan, publishes only composite results. Center Director Tai Li-an would not -- or could not -- provide AIT with copies of ERA poll cross tabulations. For example, a question in an ERA poll last week about the Lien and Soong China visits found 42% of the 896 respondents believed the visits would be "helpful" to cross-Strait peace and 35% said no. However, the absence of any cross-tabulations, particularly on party affiliation, age, and residence, limited the usefulness of the survey for understanding Taiwan public opinion on the two visits.

110. Chengchi University,s Election Study Center (ESC) Director You Ching-hsin told AIT that ESC had found party affiliation, ethnicity, and nationality to be the most significant variables affecting political views in Taiwan. TVBS Poll Center Director Wang Yeh-ding separately agreed, emphasizing that party affiliation was the single most important determinant of Taiwan public opinion.

#### Polling Trends

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111. Several polling organizations have conducted periodic surveys over many years to provide public opinion trends. ESC, for example, has run a question packet through 26 surveys over 11 years, 1994-2005; TVBS through 13 polls over five years, 2000-2005. Among the long-term Taiwan political and social trends revealed by these ongoing surveys are:

(1) Ethnic Identity: The ESC poll series shows a steady rise in Taiwan identity from 17% in 1992 to 44% in April 2004, compared to a decline in Chinese identity from 26% to 6% over the same period. The percentage of people claiming to be both Taiwanese and Chinese, however, has remained nearly constant at around 45%. According to ESC Director

You, the rise in Taiwanese identity has been largely a phenomenon among younger people and has not been accompanied by a similar rise in pro-independence sentiment. (Note: The May 2 TVBS poll, however, showed substantially higher negative attitudes toward the Lien visit among respondents in the 20-29 age bracket than among any other age bracket.)

(2) National Identity (unification vs independence): TVBS and ESC surveys show a high constant level of support for maintaining the cross-Strait status quo. In the ESC poll series, the "maintain status quo" preference averaged a fairly constant 59% over the past five years. Polls commissioned by the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) show an even higher level of support for the status quo, averaging around 80%, similar to the level shown in ERA polls (both include as status quo supporters of unification and independence willing to wait). On the other hand, the ESC series shows that support for unification has declined from 20% to 12% and support for independence has risen from 11% to 20% from 1994 to 2005.

(3) Political Parties: ESC opinion surveys show long-term increase in Taiwan voters identifying themselves as DPP (i.e., hardcore DPP supporters) from 3% in 1992 to 26%. Support for the KMT, on the other hand has declined from 35% to 22%. The swing factor in deciding legislative and presidential elections has been the large body of voters who classify themselves as "neutral," now around 40%.

¶12. TVBS Poll Director Wang also pointed out that his surveys revealed a substantial decline in voter support for the PFP. One year ago, he told AIT, PFP regularly polled about 15%, which declined to around 10% at the time of the December 2004 legislative elections, and now hovers around 5% in the aftermath of the Chen-Soong meeting.

Comment

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¶13. (SBU) The plethora of public opinion polls in Taiwan is a mixed blessing. Well done, they are an invaluable tool for understanding trends and projecting responses by the electorate. Unfiltered and politicized, they are open to abuse by politicians and politicized media, all too ready to select polls that prove their point or to commission polls with questions calibrated to provide desired results. Nevertheless, there are a number of polling agencies, including ESC and TVBS, that do make their cross-tabulations available, often immediately and on the internet. While ERA's composite surveys were among the most accurate polling in the 2004 presidential campaign (Ref A) and TVBS in the December LY election (Ref B), only the latter regularly provides the cross-tabs essential for trend analysis and discerning the impact of public opinion polls on inter-party politics. However, even the well-documented TVBS polling service is viewed with deep suspicion by many after its March 2004 experimental exit poll produced results wildly different from the final result.

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